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ABSTRACT

The paper investigates various organizational models of cable TV ownership and control, legislation in Canada and the United States regarding cable systems, and the potential of cable as an information network for adult education. With a view to giving everyone access to the cable medium and an opportunity to participate, advantages and disadvantages of three typical models of cable TV control are discussed: (1) private control, (2) public or community control, and (3) charterboard control. A major weakness in both private and public ownership is the tendency to project the views of the controlling group. Cable TV, however, is a valuable resource for the adult educator, and, in an era when people feel alienated, an opportunity to focus on community issues and relate more personally with the viewer. Limitations regarding the use of cable TV for adult education include: (1) the problem of control, (2) lack of trained staff, (3) unimaginative programing, (4) lack of funds, (5) limited time available for citizen programing, (6) lack of audience involvement, and (7) lack of research. (MW)

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POSSIBILITIES AND LIMITATIONS OF CABLE TV FOR ADULT EDUCATION

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Introduction

In November, 1970, Tony Brown was quoted in Ebony as saying "The thing for black folks is cable television."[1] In this same issue, Bill Wright of Black Efforts for Souls in Television (BEST) stated that "the potential of cable television is beyond imagination."[2] And he went on to say:

> It is fantastic what we would be able to do with (those channels). We could begin to communicate with each other, something we desperately need to do. This is really our big chance and if we blow this one, we might as well forget it.[3]

The possibilities of cable as a means of involving the community, as implied by Brown and Wright, suggest a creative use for a system that has as its initial objective the distribution of television signals which are not available to audiences in a particular geographic area. In fact, CATV derived its name from "Community Antenna Television," because it used an antenna tower to pick up distant television signals and amplify them. Through a master antenna which was erected on a high point, a strong signal could be relayed over coaxial cable to television sets in homes and other locations in the community. This initial function of cable as a carrier of the message enabled subscribers to receive less distorted signals than they would normally receive because of geography or countering electronic interference. As a result, subscribers could enjoy the full benefits of color and black and white television. The potential of this carrier function has been enhanced by technological advances which have increased the channel capacity of cable TV systems from 12 up to 40, with future capacity likely to be 80 to 100 channels.[4]

Organizational Models

The possibilities and limitations of cable TV for adult education are closely tied to the control of the system. To date, the dominant model is private control by the cable owner, or lessee, whose primary role is that of providing the "carrier" service for the television signal. The profitable nature of such an enterprise is illustrated by the estimate that in Canada, in 1972, the operator of a cable system for a town of 15,000 could recoup his original investment in five years; and, by installing small portions to keep pace with the town's growth, he could receive $1,000,000 for his system.[5] This model has ramifications for community access, as brought out in a Detroit study:

> If the system were to be privately developed, the committee would anticipate significant competition between legitimate needs for profit and support for the system's public services. This need for profit and resultant reduction of public services would be eliminated with the system in public hands ... And when the system has matured and is providing a balance of commercial and public services, public ownership will mean that the demand for profits will not compete for excess revenues which would be used for lower subscriber fees or technological improvements in the system [6]

In Canada, private ownership has received more direction relative to local programming that in the United States, due to the demise there of ETV legislation. The new role of the cable owner was spelled out by the Canadian Radio and Television Commission (CRTC) in May, 1969, as one furnishing

> community programming service of a complementary rather than a competitive nature to those already provided by other broadcasting services.[7]

This new dimension, which had as its objective the improvement of the quality of life in Canada, was seen by CRTC as

> the opportunity for CATV licensees to enrich community life by fostering communication among individuals and community groups. In the development of programmes of interest to communities, it is hoped that CATV programmers will be motivated by innovation rather than imitation. Local programmes should be based on access and freedom from restraint of programme schedules which are often less flexible in conventional broadcasting.[8]

The 1970 Report of the Special Senate Committee on Mass Media took the same view.[9] In short, the local cable system could focus not only on public affairs programming and community issues, but also on adult education courses and programming in other languages. And, as a by-product of creating this community identity, cable could serve as a facility for training future educational broadcasters.[10,11]

Of course a major limitation to adult programming over privately owned cable stations is the projection of the "establishment" point of view so pervasive in the mass media. To counteract this problem, two alternative models of ownership have been proposed. The idea of public ownership, which was mentioned earlier, has been proposed in Saskatchewan, a province that has set up guide lines to enable non-profit corporations or community cooperatives to function as local cable operators. From their operating surplus, funds would be drawn for community programming for individuals and groups.[12] However, the same limitation has been emphasized by at least one community group, which voiced "apprehension about who then would control the cable outlet. It feels the co-operatives are nothing but extensions of private enterprise."[13]

Control by a community group was the plan put forth by such a group known as "Town Talk" in Thunder Bay, Ontario. Unfortunately, the C.R.T.C. did not see fit to license an enterprising group of citizens who had

acquired expertise in the use of television. While this group planned to operate as a community forum, a major weakness was its confinement to the professional middle class.[14] Again, the very groups which lack access to the media, e.g., the unemployed, the Canadian Indian, etc., were not involved.

With a view to giving every one access to the cable medium and an opportunity to participate, let us investigate other types of organizational models. One is a charter board, or a broadly based community group representing a cross-section of all segments of society. Its main purpose is

> to take the responsibility of ensuring that all citizens have the right to participate, and that the channel will not be dominated by the most powerful voices. Democratic dialogue will include controversial subjects - and a forum for discussing them is necessary.[15]

In Canada, the implementation of community cable TV has been accomplished through the regulatory powers of the C.R.T.C., who have designated one channel for use by the community. With the exception of the system in Calgary, which has received C.R.T.C. approval to charge an extra 50 cents per month for community programming, the cost of the service is borne by the cable owners. The 1970 Special Senate Committee on Mass Media conducted research on both the cost of and interest in local programming. The research on the former was of special importance to cable operators and members of a community. Estimates on the cost of establishing a studio and staffing it indicate that larger cable systems (annual revenue of $400,000 or more) would expend $200,000 to $250,000 on initial equipment, plus a similar amount for salaries. Middle-sized

systems (annual revenue of $200,00 to $400,000) would require $90,000 for initial equipment, plus $70,000 for salaries. The idea of local programming by smaller systems was questioned because to make it feasible would require cable staff to add production responsibilities to their current assignments.[16] Although the cost estimates may seem low today, the important point is that the Federal Government was suggesting minimal equipment and staffing by cable operators in order that they might fulfil their responsibilities for local programming.

In the United States, the growth of cable systems for local programming has been slowed by municipal, state, and federal regulations. The problem of competition with VHF and UHF stations has been one of the issues which limited the initial development of cable to the non-urban areas. These smaller systems have performed the carrier function -- the provision of broadcast reception to homes outside the metropolitan area where broadcast television was poor or non existent. Initially, the systems came under the complete control of the municipality, which required a franchise for the cable system. The Federal Communications Commission was at first reluctant to regulate, but in June, 1968, the U.S. Supreme Court gave the FCC such authority. Here it is of interest to scan the rules set down by the FCC as to the number and nature of broadcast signals carried, minimum technical standards, and franchising procedures. For new systems being developed in 100 large metropolitan areas, it is important to note that these systems are required to have

> at least a 20-channel capacity, one channel reserved for non-broadcast use for each channel carried, three free channels - one for educational use, one for municipal government and one for public access, additional channel for lease, and a built-in two-way capacity, although actual two-way service is not now required.[17]

Possibilities of Cable for Adult Education

The potential of cable as an information network raises exciting possibilities for adult education, especially as it relates to learning. I refer to the widely accepted propositions that the learning process involves a lasting change of behaviour as a result of the experiences of the learner. Houle describes him as follows:

> One who increases his skill, his knowledge, or his sensitiveness. This result may be brought about as a result of purposefully educational effort on his part, purposefully educational effort on the part of an educator, or as a by-product of a random activity or one designed to achieve essentially non-educational purposes.[18]

As Houle's definition implies, learning can occur in both a formal setting and an informal setting. This latter kind of learning is referred to by Verner as "learning by chance," as opposed to "learning by design."[19] The potential of the first category in Houle's definition has been explored by Tough, who pioneered research describing how learners design their own activities through individual learning projects.[20] The second category involves an educator's deliberate creation of a situation to the end that an individual or group will learn new behaviours. And, of course, learning in the latter two categories may be occurring directly or in a subliminal manner to the television viewer.

This brief discussion of learning and learning experiences leads us to recognize the diversity that cable can contribute in this area, for it makes available two different media -- television and radio. Our tendency has been to focus attention on the visual medium, but as Robertson and Yokom suggest:

> Since some cable systems reach into homes not equipped to receive educational FM signals, this also opens up the possibility of developing many friends for public radio.[21]

Another possibility that cable TV offers to adult educators relates to community involvement. In an era when people feel alienated, here is a resource that would help them to focus on community issues. A good example of what could occur is the VTR Project launched by the St. Jacques Citizens' Committee in Montreal in 1968:

> They went out into the streets and interviewed the people about their problems, in order to learn more about the neighbourhood and to make people think about what could be done. Then an edited half-hour tape was used to catalyze discussion at the beginning of a series of public meetings. The procedure was very effective; people plunged into the heart of discussion instead of being fearful about expressing themselves. The citizens also learned a lot about themselves by viewing themselves in action during meetings and discussions.[22]

In the case of cable TV, the tapes would be shown not only in public meeting places, but over the local cable station and so reach a wider audience. Also, in the production of the program, the use of portable equipment would provide more flexibility and "reality" by allowing participants to tell their story through visual presentations. This community involvement has another value, in that the participants go through an intensive learning experience as they research and present ideas on important social issues. The use of VTR equipment in the community has another potential. It provides the members with a tool for need assessment which could be utilized for adult education programming.

One unique experiment has been the use of cable TV as an electronic town hall. Such a system enables citizens to participate in discussions and to vote on issues while sitting in their own living rooms. From research

done to date, the idea appears to have merit. It allows citizens to participate in the safety and convenience of their homes and relieves husbands and wives from the necessity of finding baby-sitters. No doubt these factors help to explain why the electronic townhall was preferred over the large public meeting.[23] Such activities by citizens involving access to the medium and the process of participation is similar to the approach advocated by Freire, whose concept of "conscientization" has been described as follows:

> ... the process in which men, not as recipients, act as knowing subjects, achieve a deepening awareness both of the socio-cultural reality which shapes their lives and of their capacity to transform that reality.[24]

Such involvement by the learner points to another possibility that cable TV offers to adult educators, and that is its "naturalness." Whereas these locally produced programs may not be highly polished, they often present an appealing authenticity lacking in more "professional" enterprises. One reason for this authenticity relates to the use of language. Among ethnic groups or new Canadians, this language might be the mother tongue or an improvised one blending elements of their own language and English. Among other groups, the dialects may be distinctive ones that are almost incomprehensible to others. Yet the use of these languages is often the key to persuading people to participate in community utilization of cable TV as a channel for adult learning. Finally, for members of a community, a guiding philosophy for locally produced educational programs is suggested by an Alberta Study:

> Community media implies community involvement; therefore any educational program developed would have to be such that it could be part of the community, and the participants

> could learn and work on their own terms. Teaching materials would have to be simple and readily available to all participants and instructional sessions would have to be workshops or similar activities where every one could feel free to participate.[25]

In short, the truly effective use of cable TV for community purposes entails the establishment of adult education programs that would enable participants to learn by doing. In addition to organizing workshops, the adult educator bears the responsibility of collaborating with the media specialist in the development of written and visual materials which could be designed as individual learning modules.

While I have concentrated on adult education programs that originate in the community, cable TV provides expanded opportunities for formal programs. In the United States, for example, Vincennes University has operated cable systems in its immediate area since 1964. Here, as in Ontario, Canada, the cable system has been used as a carrier of educational offerings developed for VHF or UHF. However, this system also gives opportunities for further development of campus-free institutions similar to the University Without Walls and New York's Empire State College. In the area of continuing non-credit education, the possibilities are enormous -- from the offerings of professional programs to a particular segment of society to the offering of courses on consumer affairs, local history, ecology, etc.

Limitations of Cable TV for Adult Education

One of the major limitations of using cable TV for adult education programming was stated earlier in our discussion of the problem of control -- the projection of the "establishment" point of view. This limitation could be overcome by organizing a broadly based community group representing a cross-section of all segments of society. Such a move would help ensure

a voice for minority groups in particular.

Another major limitation has been the lack of trained staff to assist the educator and citizens in the design of programs. One way to surmount or topple this barrier would be to provide workshops, similar to those offered here, focussing on topics like program planning and learning. Here at the Conference, the participants work together in an atmosphere which instills confidence while at the same time demanding high standards.

Such gatherings must also concern themselves with another problem relating to cable TV -- the need to consider alternative formats. One disease having high incidence in locally produced programs is "panelitis." To be sure, it offers the advantage of saving time and money in the design of the program. But these credits to the producer are debits to the learner, who does not really require the visual dimension in panel situations. In fact, the video segment of the program may actually detract from the discussion when the viewer focusses on a speaker's mannerisms. Another format with similar limitations is the interview.

For formal courses, a major limitation of ETV programs is reported by Niemi:

> ... it seems painfully clear that many adult educators are failing to exploit to the fullest the potentialities of ETV as a multi-sensory medium with an unique capacity to involve the viewer. Too often, they are looking at McLuhan's rear view mirror when they assume that the kind of of presentation which is appropriate for the classroom or lecture hall is equally appropriate for the television screen.[26]

The situation revealed here actually reflects the fact that many adult educators have little or no experience with TV. Hence they fall back on the lecture method, with which they feel safe. What they must do is to

collaborate even more closely with the broadcaster and the media specialists. Such collaboration should prove fruitful on both sides. The educator comes to appreciate the potential of TV for adult learners and to see possibilities for different formats for his purposes. He shares with the media specialist insights into the nature and processes of learning. The media specialist, on his part, demonstrates such skills as interviewing and scriptwriting, along with technical knowledge relating to production. A good example of such cooperation is the United Kingdom's "Open University," in which the talents of educators and broadcasters have been pooled for the purpose of offering degrees to adults outside of formal institutions.

Another limitation of cable TV for adult education is a lack of funds and access by members of a community to equipment for editing, dubbing, etc. In addition to acquiring support from the cable owner, another way of overcoming these problems would be to have equipment and grants available from local media associations, libraries, school, universities, etc.

Yet another limitation of cable TV has its roots in the evolutionary development of the station from an "ad hoc" facility available for local programming to an established alternative station with printed schedules for TV viewing. Such a policy would permit little time for "citizen" programming, with the result that the public becomes a passive audience instead of active participants. Here, we have what Wright alluded to as "a blown opportunity."

The topic of audience also suggests another limitation of cable TV for adult education -- that of one-way communication. This problem can be overcome in a couple of ways. One would be through the use of "listening groups" Ohliger describes this phenomenon as follows:

> When a group of adults meet together on a regular basis to discuss radio or television programs for educational purposes, this activity is called a listening group. It is usually conducted under the leadership of a lay person, sometimes with the assistance of supplemental materials and with arrangements for two-way communications (feedback) between the listeners and broadcasters.[27]

The telephone is a useful way to involve the public, as I found in the Spring of 1970. We used a hot-line to answer questions from the viewing audience, to get some valuable feedback. Although cable casting was new in Vancouver, the panel fielded some excellent questions for 42 minutes.

A final limitation of cable TV for adult education is the lack of research. This dearth of data on feedback has resulted in subjective impressions being used as means of assessing the appropriateness of this medium for adult learning.

The Future

An underlying theme of futurologic studies is that of lifelong learning and, related to it, greater access by adults to the communications networks which offer alternative approaches to learning. Such networks could incorporate old media with new technology to assist learners in spanning time and space, e.g., satellites extending the television signal and two-way cable systems that are sometimes linked to a computer center or resource library from which a multitude of programs could be available over one of the educational channels as a delayed or repeated broadcast.

The satellite is already creating a global village. One possible type of adult education would be cultural programs in foreign languages, which would enable learners to acquire competency in other languages and also improve their understanding of how people function in different cultural milieus.

The two-way cable systems not only provide learners with opportunities for interaction, but also the possibility of participating in individual learning projects through computer-assisted instruction. This use of technology to expand and enrich human resources holds out great promise for adult education. A combination of skillfully planned experiences for learners and a humane concern for their hopes and needs could hasten the realization of Tough's vision:

> the adult learner of the future will be highly competent in deciding what to learn and planning and arranging his own learning. He will successfully diagnose and solve almost any problem or difficulty that arises. He will obtain appropriate help competently and quickly, but only when necessary.[28]

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